

Provenance

IV

For the next few days, I felt on edge, much more so than after the postcard incident. Whenever I spotted Jasper coming to talk to me, I would head in the opposite direction. After the first few times, he got the hint. He tried to call me, but I started screening my calls. The intermittent ringing of my unanswered phone bothered Julia. It must have been one of her pet peeves. After her hints to answer the phone failed, she launched a passive-aggressive sound war, loudly playing Hank Williams and Glenn Campbell songs on her computer to annoy me into submission. When I retaliated with the Ramones, she surrendered and turned the volume back down.

Jasper gave up trying to contact me by the end of the week.

I saw no sign of Thom. I was surprised that he actually kept his promise and stayed away. I couldn't understand why this didn't make me as happy as it should have. It wasn't like I was in any hurry to experiment with my knack again. In the past, I had refused to let myself get curious and start experimenting with it. Not for the first time, I wished that I had someone to talk it all over with. 'Course, how could I do that when I would have to reveal my trick, and possibly my mental instability? The only other person I knew who had something like it was one of the people I was studiously avoiding. It was an unsolvable problem, and I tucked it away with the growing list of things that I didn't want to think about.

When five o'clock on Friday rolled around, I was able to muster some enthusiasm for the weekend. Two days without having to worry that Jasper would corner me and starting talking about our gifts. Even among librarians (and we were a pretty eccentric bunch), this was weird. And I definitely didn't want to give Julia any more ammunition. She was a champion gossiper, and didn't need the help.

When I walked out the back door, I felt a strong November wind blow lifting my curls off my neck. I wished that I had brought a scarf. Leaves had been falling steadily for weeks. It wouldn't be long before the trees were bare. I wished sometimes that I lived somewhere that it snowed more. Any snow we did get here melted before long. For most of the winter, all we had to look forward to was freezing rain and slush. Joy. I was going to have to bring out the winter coat soon, I reminded myself. I adjusted my backpack and set off down the street.

My apartment was only a fifteen minute walk from the university and seeing all the hundred year old Edwardians never got old for me. Even though many of them were packed to the rafters with

undergraduates and harried graduate assistants, they still had class and charm. Okay, maybe not the ones with the vomit in the bushes and flags with marijuana leaves hanging in the windows, but the rest of them had class and charm.

The orange light from the street lamps filtered down through the tree branches, making far more shadows than it eliminated. There was no moonlight, either, so it wasn't surprising that I didn't see him at first. As I rounded the corner, a tall figure pushed away from a tree and headed in my direction. I couldn't make out his face until he was a few feet away from me. Then I saw the misty blue eyes and the curly red hair. Jack. It was the man who had chased Becca to her death.

Jack came towards me with a bright smile on his face. "Hi! Jack Wolfram," he said, holding out a hand.

I suppressed a shudder at the sight of it. I couldn't help but remember where I had last seen that hand, wiping off Becca's blood on her favorite hoodie.

"I'm new to the area, just checking out the neighborhood," he said.

I couldn't think of an excuse not to shake his hand, but I withdrew as soon as I could. "Welcome," I mumbled.

Jack looked around, shoving his hands in to his pockets. "Nice neighborhood. Hey, do you think that you could show me around sometime? Since I'm new and all?"

"Uh..." I stalled, trying to come up with an excuse to leave. I could see my goal—my front door—just beyond Jack's shoulder, only forty feet away.

Jack picked up on my reticence. "Oh, I'm sorry. I must seem pretty pushy. I'm sure you have a boyfriend and here I am, asking you to to show me the sights. And you don't know me from Adam."

"Maybe some other time..." I said, and moved around him. I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding.

"Yeah, maybe. Have a good night, Ada."

My blood froze the instant I heard my name come out of his mouth. I whirled around. "You don't know me. How do you know my name?"

"Thom Vilkas led me to you."

That rat bastard, I thought. That absolute bastard! "Did he?" I said flatly. "Did he also tell you that I'm not involved anymore? My part's done. He's on his own from now on."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "No, he didn't. You guys have a fight or something?"

Reluctantly, I turned my back on Jack and headed resolutely for my door. I was definitely going to get that burglar chain. A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, making me jump.

“That's a shame that you two had a falling out. Thom needs all the allies he can get,” Jack said. “Tell me, Ada, what was your part in all this? Of all the people that Vilkas could have gone to for help, why did he come to you?”

“Why do you care?” I blurted.

Jack pulled me close, draping his arm around my shoulder companionably. “Because I'm going to take everything that belongs to him and make it mine.” His sudden grin made me shudder.

“I'm not involved. Let me go,” I said, trying to get out from under his heavy arm.

He pulled me in closer and started walking me down the sidewalk—right past my apartment and into the darkening evening.

“A librarian,” Jack mused. “It makes no sense. I did see you come out of the library, right? I just can't figure that guy out.” He snorted. “Thom must be wily or something.”

I said nothing. I couldn't even muster the brainpower to come up with a smart aleck comment. It wouldn't have helped the situation, but it would have made me feel better. Maybe.

“But all of a sudden, my buddy Thom shows up and starts strolling down Yessler Way. The day after my guys see him visit your library. Don't you think that's an awfully big coincidence?” He looked down at me. Did he really expect me to answer his question? I wasn't *that* stupid.

Jack continued. “Now, how did Tommy know to go to Yessler? Are you some kind of psychic? Did you do some psychic voodoo for him and tell him where to go? No, that's stupid. Psychics are all fakers. A witch?” Jack bent his head over and sniffed deeply. “No, that's not it. Tell me, little librarian, did you point him in our direction?” He squeezed my neck with his arm.

“No! He found you on his own, I swear!”

“Not even a hint?” he grinned at me. “Well, Ada my sweet, he got help from someone at that library. Before he visited you he didn't have a clue where little sister had gone. Then, all of a sudden, he shows up on my doorstep? What are the odds?”

“I don't know. I don't know who he talked to.”

“Sure you do, little librarian. Tell you what, tell me who it was and I won't tear your throat out. Promise. Scout's honor and everything.” His arm slid off my shoulders, but his hand clamped down on the back of my neck and squeezed, just a little, so that I could feel just how strong those fingers were.

“I don't know. I—”

Jack's hand tightened, and his smile disappeared. “Don't tell me that you didn't help him. Don't tell me that you don't know. Lying to me would be a very bad idea.”

“You're going to tear my throat out twice?”

Oh, how I wish I had kept my fat mouth shut. I clapped my hand to my mouth. Hadn't I seen this man in, well, action? At the zoo, he had run Becca to the ground like a deer and killed her. Jack stepped in front of me, still hanging on to my neck. He pulled me close to his face. So close that I thought I could see his whiskers growing on his chin. The short red fuzz glittered under the street lights.

"I've been really patient with you, little librarian. Little mousy librarian, who doesn't have a fucking clue what she's deal with. You don't, do you? Tell me who Vilkas talked to. How did he find me?"

"Will you leave me alone if I do?"

"You don't seem to understand your position here. I could kill you before you could take another breath. You got no room to bargain. But I'll be generous. Tell me and I'll be on my way."

I stared up into Jack's calm blue eyes. Yes, they were still calm. I could see that his jaw was tight with anger, struggling to keep the emotion in check. But his eyes still looked calm, and that struck me as more frightening than anything. He would kill me and not even think about it. No qualms, no nothing. His hand tightened even more, and the tendons in my neck started to cramp and protest. I desperately tried to think of a way out. I could give up Jasper, but he had even less ability to defend himself than I did. He was an old man, for God's sake. Could I live with myself if he died because I gave him up?

I opened my mouth to say...something. I'm still not sure what I was planning to say. Before a sound could cross my lips, a huge figure crashed into Jack's ribs in the textbook ideal of a tackle. We all fell to the ground, and I finally pulled free of Jack's grip. I rolled away and got to my feet, turned and ran back towards the safety of home. I heard growling and swearing and snarling behind me. The dull, meaty impact of fists striking. Howls of pain and anger. If it weren't for the swearing, they sounded exactly like a pair of dogs fighting. My steps slowed as I started to think. Who had come to my rescue and blitzed Jack?

Before I realized quite what I was doing, I turned and headed back to the fight. Jack and the man he was fighting with were rolling around on the ground, tearing up the turf with their heels. This fight had no style. It was one of those really serious fights, the kind that happen in alleys in the wee hours of the morning. If you couldn't kill the other guy, you tried to maim him, hurt him. Winning wasn't as important as hurting the other guy enough to make him give up. What the hell did I think I could do? And then, I had an idea.

I spotted a garden hose coiled neatly next to some empty terracotta pots stacked by the house's

porch. I ran over to it and turned on the water. The hose spat air for a couple of seconds, then icy water poured out of the end. I stuck a finger over the end to make the water spray in a wide arc, then turned the hose on the men. The shouting and cursing turned to squeals of surprise. Jack ran off as soon as he was free and I lost sight of him in the dark. His attacker shook his head just like a dog, sending water over everything. Lights came on inside the house and I heard an angry and bewildered voice call out, “What the fuck...?”

I dropped the hose and ran for it. My rescuer followed me, flinging drops of frigid water as he went. I made it to my porch and scrambled to find my keys. I heard heavy steps on the boards directly behind me.

“Next time, could you just shoot me with pepper spray or taser me or something? Anything other than freezing water in November. Was that the best you could come up with?” my rescuer growled.

Whipping around, I saw Thom standing at the top of the steps. He was shivering violently. He was also making a puddle on the floorboards.

“Don't just stand there, Ada. Let me in before my bits freeze off.”

My fingers found my keys and I shoved them at the lock. My hands were shaking so badly that I couldn't even find the one that actually opened the door. I dropped them with a clatter. Thom sighed heavily and scooped them up off the porch. It took him a couple of tries, but he got the right one and let us both in. He pushed me towards the living room and then headed down the hallway.

“What do you think you're doing?” I called.

“I'm getting a towel. Where is your bathroom?”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh, first door on the right.”

“Thanks.” Thom came back down the hall, rubbing a purple towel over his hair. “Jesus, what were you thinking?” he asked, glaring at me from under the terry cloth.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

The lanky man barked a laugh and resumed trying to dry off. After a minute, he flung the towel down the hallway. He peeled his coat off and draped it neatly over a dining chair.

“You wouldn't have anything that I could change into, would you?” he asked. His University of Washington sweatshirt was mostly dry, but his jeans were soaked and starting to cling to his legs.

“Nope, sorry.”

“Do you have a dryer?”

I nodded. “It's downstairs. There's a laundry room. What are you doing?” I asked, incredulous.

Thom was tugging at his boots. “Don't worry, I've got boxers on.”

“Don't you dare!” I jumped up off the couch.

“Ada, I can't stand wet jeans. I'm just going to use the dryer. You're not going to get to see anything other than my hairy knees.” His hiking boots sailed through the air and landed with a thud by the door. Thom turned his attention to his pants and whipped them off. At the sight of his Tasmanian devil boxers, I laughed. I couldn't help it. I had just lost my fear of this man. I couldn't be afraid of a guy with cartoons on his underwear.

“How do I get to the laundry room?”

“You have to go outside.”

“I was afraid of that. Where do I go?”

“I'll walk you.”

Thom looked at me for a moment, his face unreadable. “Thanks,” he said again, stomping his boots back on.

At the door, Thom stopped me and stuck his head out, as if to make sure that the coast was clear. Weirdly, he sucked a big breath of air in through his nose and held it, as if he was trying to smell anything out of the ordinary. When he decided that the deserted street was safe, we walked out and I led the way around the corner to the little door that led to the communal laundry room. I opened it up and flicked on the light. Wooden stairs led down into the old house's basement.

I was lucky enough to live in one of the Edwardian houses I admired. As near as I could tell, it had been built around the start of the first world war. Sometime in the 60s or 70s, someone had gone through and divided it all up into apartments. The basement was one of the few remnants of the original building. The walls were made of field stone, and had flaky mortar binding them together. Thick, dry beams held up the low ceiling. The ceiling was so low that Thom had to bend over to keep from smacking his head on those beams. Against one wall stood a pair of dryers and a pair of washers. Thom went to work with a dryer.

It smelled like my grandmother's house down here, musty with memories and pickled vegetables.

“Jack said he had you followed. But how did he find me?” I asked.

Thom's hands stilled on the dials for a moment. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

I laughed coldly. “*I* won't believe *you*? I've seen and done some pretty weird things myself, Thom. Of course, I'll believe you. He said that you led him to me,” I added.

“I suppose that's true, in a manner of speaking.”

“How dare you, Thom! He was going to kill me!” I shouted. I might not be afraid of Thom anymore, but I was absolutely furious with him.

“But I stopped him,” Thom said calmly.

“That's not the point. How did you lead him to me?”

“He tracked me. Just like I tracked him.”

“What are you? A bloodhound?” I snarled.

“Not exactly.”

Thom pushed a button and set the dryer to chugging. He dragged over another lawn chair and sat next to me. Reluctantly, I sat down, too. He pushed one of his sleeves up, roughing up the crinkly hair that covered his arm like fur. Now that I looked at him, I noticed that he was a remarkably hairy man. His long legs stretched out in front of him, shadowed with hair. If I were in the mood to notice such things, I would have said he had nice fuzzy knees. He also needed a shave, and his green eyes looked exhausted. Revenge must be a tiring business.

Thom held up his bared forearm in front of me. The hair abruptly thickened. I blinked. Then Thom's fingers thickened and shrank as I watched. His nails darkened to black and turned into short thick claws. Most frightening of all, the rest of him remained perfectly human, only his forearm was changing. Thom watched his arm with a little wrinkle forming between his brows, concentrating on his mutation.

I broke and ran for the stairs. Plastic clattered behind me, and another heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder. I stopped dead in my tracks. I hadn't even made it two feet. If these werewolves stuck around, I was going to need to start running again, I thought. Get some of my speed back.

Thom turned me around to face him, and I reluctantly looked up into his face. If anything, he looked more tired. At least he didn't look like he was going to eat me. And his arm was human again. God, if he had touched me with his paw...well, I probably would have just sat down on the stairs and lost my mind.

“If you sit down again, I'll explain.” Thom said. “You wanted an explanation, right?”

I nodded.

“I promise not to touch you again. Just come sit down,” he said.

I nodded again. Maybe if you pointed a gun at me, I could have spoken. But right now I was too stunned to say anything. The blue plastic squeaked under our weight when we sat down.

“I never thought I'd be having this conversation without pants on,” Thom said and chuckled softly.

“I win. I never thought I'd be having this conversation at all,” I said, finding my voice. “What are you?”

“Werewolf.”

I almost swallowed my tongue. “A werewolf?”

Thom looked at me wryly. “Did you miss the practical demonstration?” He lifted his arm to remind me, and I almost bolted again when he wagged his long fingers at me.

“A werewolf,” I repeated. “Full moon, Lon Chaney, silver bullet kind of werewolf?”

“It's a bit more complicated than that, Ada.”

“I don't even know how to respond to this.”

“I doubt Miss Post has anything to say about it.”

I laughed, surprising myself. Maybe the cartoon boxers were having their effect on me again. “I'm kind of tempted to find out about that.” I paused, “So, were you bitten by some weirdo in the woods or something?”

I got a dirty look in response. “No, I was born a werewolf, thank you very much.”

“Hey, take it easy, I'm new to werewolf etiquette, here.”

“I can do a lot more than someone who was only bitten. Like you saw.”

“Are you the only one around here?”

“No, our pack lives up near Bellingham, up north of here.” Then he let out a jaw cracking yawn and slouched down in his chair. “We've been there for a generation or two.”

“Jack's a werewolf, too?”

“Yes, though it pains me to say it. He lives in Seattle.”

“And he's looking to...er...expand his territory?” I hazarded.

“You could say that. But that's how he found you. He tracked me, had me followed. He sniffed me out.”

It was sort of comforting to hear that Thom hadn't meant to lead Jack to my doorstep. Emphasis on the sort of.

“What did he want?” Thom asked.

“He wanted to know how you found him so fast. He said you almost showed up on his doorstep.”

“Hardly. All you gave me was Yessler. I had to work it out from there.” He gestured to his long elegant nose, so different from Becca's thin, pointy one.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don't be. It was a lot more than I had before. Following the bastard is like trying to track fog. He disappears before I can get a fix on him, even with my nose. Do you know how many restaurants there are in that area? Must be dozens, all pumping out smells and attracting all kinds of animals. I almost didn't find it. If I never smell oregano again it'll be too soon. Managed to find the place, though.”

“Did you find...anything?”

“Not much,” he admitted. “Jack and his pack have moved on.” He scrubbed a hand over his face and hair, making the shaggy black hair stick up in damp little spikes. “I don't know how I'm going to find him again. I have no more clues.”

“Something will turn up,” I offered. Wait a minute, was I trying to comfort a werewolf? This could not get any weirder. And now I had just jinxed myself. Shit.

“I sure hope so. I can't allow this...this *gyvate*...to pick off members of my pack.” Thom's fists clenched with emotion, and I resisted the urge to reach out to him.

We sat and listened to the dryer tumble his jeans around for a while. The buttons on his jeans clattered like loose change. Meanwhile, my mind was going a million miles a minute. On the one hand, lots of little oddities were starting to fall into place. I felt like I understood what was going on for the first time in a week.

On the other hand, I felt myself being draw further and further into this deadly business. When I had thought it was over, the bad guy himself had showed up outside my door and almost snapped my neck in an effort to get information. And now I definitely couldn't go to the police. What the hell was I supposed to tell them? I had been threatened by a *werewolf*. They probably would have given me the number for a therapist. If they didn't just laugh me out of the office in the first place. Christ.

Then a horrifying thought occurred to me. It wasn't just me who was mixed up in this. Jasper was, too. And if Jack had found me, he could probably find the old librarian, too. I glanced at Thom. His eyes were shut, and it looked like he was dozing. I jumped about a foot when he spoke.

“You're squirming in your chair and making it squeak. What's wrong?” he asked.

“Have you seen Jasper lately?”

“Oh, sure, we went bowling and had beers last night,” he said, not opening his eyes.

“Really?” I was surprised.

“No, I was being sarcastic. I thought you didn't want to see either of us again. Why do you care about Jasper all of a sudden?” he asked.

“I didn't, but I was thinking that if your nemesis found me, then he could find Jasper. And since you're here, who's going to protect him?” I asked.

“Jesus!” Thom jumped out of his chair and leapt for the dryer. He interrupted the cycle and started trying to drag his wet jeans back on. “We have to go find him.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. I can't keep my eye on you if you don't come along. Unless you want to take your chances with Jack on the loose?” he offered, cocking an eyebrow at me.

“Of course not!” I blurted. “Do you know where he lives?”

“Yup.” He buttoned up. “Do you have a car?”

“No.” It was in the shop. Again. Stupid auction vehicle.

“Okay, we're going in mine.” Thom ran up the stairs, three at a time.

I wasn't far behind him.

Thom was parked a block away. When we got close, he aimed his key fob at it. Two beeps let me know that the doors were unlocked and I hauled the passenger side door open. Thom started the engine and pulled out almost before I could buckle myself in. Incongruously, Bob Marley started to sing that everything was going to be all right. I gaped at the tape player.

“Werewolves listen to Bob Marley?” I asked

“I don't know about the rest of us, but I do,” Thom said. “Don't judge.”

Within minutes, we were out of the university district and into the older commercial area of town. Main Street and all that. It was Friday night and the streets were packed with students and Augustans heading out to restaurants and bars and stores. The slow pace made Thom growl in frustration and made my stomach start to churn with worry for Jasper. As far as I knew, Jasper didn't even know what Jack looked like and didn't know not to trust him. We finally broke through the traffic and headed for the outskirts of town, to the low wooded hills that surrounded Augusta.

Thom took a couple more turns and pulled into the driveway of a small ranch house. There was a single light on inside, but the rest was completely dark. Light flickered blue and white in a front window. The TV. My stomach started to settle down, just a bit. Thom loped up to the door and pounded on it with a fist. Long seconds went by before the door cracked open. Jasper's large lenses peered at us through the gap. He was still wearing working clothes: khakis and a button down blue shirt.

“Thom? What's going on? Ada?” He sounded surprised when he saw me. Well, I would be surprised to see someone who had been avoiding me all week show up on my front porch, too.

“Can we come in?” Thom asked. “We really need to talk to you.”

“Apparently,” the old librarian said. The door opened wider and we went in.

Just like his office, most of Jasper's walls had bookcases of all descriptions leaning against them. The shelves were full of hardcovers and paperbacks, stacked to maximize the number that could fit into the available space. Jasper led us through to the living room. A small couch and an easy chair fought for space with the books. An empty plate rested on a side table, a fork laid neatly across it. Jasper turned on a lamp, then reached for the remote and flipped the TV off.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” he asked blandly.

Thom looked a little abashed. I don't know what we were expecting, maybe something like what had happened to me. We had rushed across town in a panic and here was Jasper, enjoying his dinner and a little evening TV, cozy and safe. And looking a little irritated that we had interrupted his evening.

“Jack came after me tonight, Dr. Jasper,” I began.

“Jack?” the librarian asked.

“The man who's responsible for what happened to Becca,” I said.

“I see.”

Thom found his voice, “Have you seen a tall redheaded man hanging around here? Asking questions? When he found her, he tried to convince Ada that he had just moved into the area.”

“No, I haven't seen any one like that. I just came straight in the house. What does he look like?”

I described Jack as well as I could. I was starting to understand those crime shows I used to watch before I started living on my own and had to stop. (They gave me nightmares.) It really *had* happened so fast. About all I remembered was his height and hair and his soft blue psychopathic eyes. That, and the feeling of his rough hand gripping the back of my neck like a vice. I shivered at the memory. I added a self defense class to my mental list of things to do soon. Burglar chain, running, now self defense. God, I was a librarian. This sort of thing was supposed to happen to other people.

When I was done with my scanty description, Jasper turned a nasty look on Thom. “This is your fault, Vilkas. You brought this murderer into Ada's life and into my life.”

“Yes,” Thom admitted. “And I'm sorry for it. But you have to understand why I did it. You do understand, don't you? I have to do what I can for Becca. For her memory.”

“Yes, I do. But that doesn't mean that I have to like it.” Jasper rubbed his hands together, as if suddenly cold.

The old librarian turned and walked out of the room. I heard the soft *boops* of someone dialing a phone and Thom hurriedly went after Jasper. The phone slammed back into place. Thom led a grumbling Jasper back into the living room.

“I want to call the police, Vilkas. They'll take of this.”

No, I thought, they can't. Who could take care of werewolves, for God's sake?

Jasper went on, “I don't want to be a part of your little quest for vengeance.”

“My what?” Thom was startled.

“You want revenge. For Becca. I'm not stupid, boy,” Jasper said. He kept looking back the way he had come, no doubt calculating his odds of reaching the phone and dialing before Thom caught him again. “I won't be a part of it, Vilkas. Thank you for your warning, but I think it's time for you to go. I hope never to see you again.” Jasper turned his attention to me. “Ada, I'll see you on Monday.”

I nodded and headed for the door. Thom stopped me with a gentle hand on the arm.

“Dr. Jasper, I'd like to call in a few friends, to keep an eye on you for the next couple of days.”

“You think I can't take care of myself?”

“No offense to you, but no, you I don't think you can defend yourself against Jack. You know what he's capable of, Bruce,” Thom said.

I sure did. I could almost feel the bruises darkening on my neck.

Jasper shook his head. “I can defend myself just fine. I'm not a helpless old man, Thom. I'm armed.”

“You can't hurt us with guns,” Thom said. I glanced at him, alarmed. How much of the stories was fact?

“I know that. I'm not totally ignorant.” Jasper walked over to his chair and opened the drawer on the side table. “I really ought to get a scabbard or something for,” he said. I saw something shine in the lamplight as Jasper turned. In his liver-spotted hand, he held a long, thin dagger. It wasn't steel; it was too bright. It looked almost like—

“Is that silver?” I asked.

“It is. And it was damned hard to acquire,” Jasper answered. He gripped the softly glowing handle and held it, examining it. “The blacksmith I had forge it almost ruptured himself laughing at me. But, as you can see, Thom, it's quite sharp.” Jasper slashed experimentally towards the tall werewolf and Thom hurriedly dodged out of the way.

“There are still blacksmiths?”

“There are in the Society for Creative Anachronism. Terrible nerds, the lot of them. Nerds? That's the right word, isn't it? But some of them know what they're doing,” Jasper said.

“Do you know how to use it?” Thom asked, looking warily at the old librarian.

“Aim for something vital and don't lose your nerve,” Jasper replied.

I made a noise and Thom spoke, “But have you ever even been in a fight before? Are you still quick enough, old man?”

Without warning, Thom lunged at Jasper. Within seconds, Thom had knocked the knife out of the old man's hands. Jasper stared at him. He didn't even know what had hit him. Before the two of them started up their pissing match again, I stepped forward and looked Jasper in the eye.

“Please, just take his help. A couple more eyes watching out for you won't hurt anything,” I said softly.

Jasper gave Thom a long look, then his silver knife. He nodded at last. “Fine, but only for a couple of days. And I'm not feeding them or letting them sleep here. They're on their own.”

“Deal,” Thom said. “I'll call them tonight and tell them to get down here.”

Thom went through the routine of checking to see if Jack or any of his pack mates were hiding in the bushes in the front yard, then we went back to the car. I climbed right in and clicked the seatbelt into place. Thom paused at the driver's side door and looked back at the ranch house.

“I imagined that going differently, in my head,” he said slowly.

“If it's any consolation, I thought it would go differently, too. Can we go? I didn't bring a jacket.” The fact that I remembered to bring gloves should tell you where my priorities were. I didn't want to chance learning about all the people that Thom hauled around in his car, but I was apparently okay with letting the rest of my body tremble in the cold November night.

“I don't really want to leave him here on his own.”

“He didn't exactly give you a choice. Come on. It's freezing out.”

Wordlessly, Thom climbed into the driver's seat and we headed back into town. After a few minutes, Bob Marley started to work his magic on me and I began to relax. Just a little.

I turned to face Thom. “Is it true what he said? Do you want revenge for Becca?”

“If someone did that to your sister, wouldn't you want to kill them?”

“I don't have a sister.”

“Irrelevant, but I'll rephrase the question. If someone did this to a member of your family, wouldn't you want revenge?”

“I don't know,” I said.

“Liar. Of course you'd want revenge. It's a human thing.”

“But you're not human,” I pointed out.

Thom sighed, “I'm close enough. Yes, I do want revenge. I want to protect my pack. It's my job. I'm supposed to protect them. We're family. Jack is a threat and I can't allow him to hurt my family.”

“You're going to kill him.”

“Just as soon as I can. And I'm going to take down that bunch of misfits and freaks that he calls a pack, too. They're too dangerous to let live.”